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SUBJECT: STAFFDEL GROVE DISCUSSES BILATERAL RELATIONS,
CAMBODIA AND BURMA WITH MFA

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Senior MFA officials cautioned visiting Senate Appropriations Committee Majority Clerk Paul Grove that continued USG pressure on Burma and Cambodia will only push those countries closer to China, and will not succeed in convincing them to become more responsible international actors. Vietnam is extremely appreciative of USG assistance in combating HIV/AIDS and Avian Influenza, and believes that the United States has an important role to play in the region. Bilateral relations between the United States and Vietnam are going well, but Vietnam's WTO entry is still under negotiation and human rights/religious freedom will remain a contentious issue. End Summary.

MFA AMERICAS DESK

¶2. (SBU) Senate Appropriations Committee Clerk Paul Grove met February 20 with MFA Americas Department Deputy Director General Nguyen Ba Hung. Grove had been scheduled to meet with DG and Assistant Minister Nguyen Duc Hung, but Hung canceled at the last minute due to "urgent family business." (Note: AFM Hung was also unable to attend the U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue and missed a reception at the Ambassador's residence that evening. End Note.) Ba Hung noted that the U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue (septel) was ongoing in the next room; Grove responded that the issues of human rights and religious freedom are of great importance to both the Executive and Legislative branches in the United States.

¶3. (SBU) Ba Hung praised the strengthened relationship between the United States and Vietnam in 2005, noting that the highlight was Prime Minister Phan Van Khai's June 2005 visit to the United States. 2005 produced many agreements between the Vietnam and the United States at the government and business levels, and the task in 2006 is to implement all of these agreements. The second task is to work to bring Vietnam into the WTO, a goal Vietnam wants to achieve this year. There is a great deal of work to do on Vietnam's WTO entry, Ba Hung conceded, but signals from the United States appear to Vietnam to be positive, and the GVN will "try to respond positively" after the most recent round of negotiations. Third, the GVN is preparing for the visit of President Bush to Vietnam in the fall of 2006. Combined, these tasks represent an intensive pace of relations, he said.

¶4. (SBU) Vietnam does not, at the moment, see any major obstacles to ongoing good relations, Ba Hung continued. The ongoing Human Rights Dialogue demonstrates that both sides

have overcome the obstacles that might prevent such a dialogue, and no other major political or economic issues appear to be insurmountable. Of course some "working level difficulties" still exist, he said.

¶ 5. (SBU) One of those working level difficulties is the ongoing negotiation for Vietnam's entry into the WTO, Ba Hung explained. There has been progress: "The U.S. delegation told us that before the last round of talks, we were 20 centimeters apart; after the talks we are only two centimeters apart. We hope the next round brings us together." The GVN needs to review the U.S. recommendations and suggestions, and the U.S. side needs to examine the GVN offer. These are technical differences, he said, that do not rise to the title of "obstacle."

¶ 6. (SBU) In the realm of political issues, there remains a great deal of work to be done on human rights and religious freedom, Ba Hung said. "With some principled actions we have taken together in the last year, such as the exchange of letters on religious freedom between Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang and Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom John Hanford, we have created guidelines and principles for our joint work and cooperation to settle differences on this matter," he continued. Since that exchange of letters, Vietnam has done a lot, including improving Vietnam's legal framework for religious belief, creating better conditions for religious practice, and making a concerted effort to meet the demands of the United States regarding prisoners of concern. Of course, GVN actions were based on a desire to improve conditions for Vietnamese people and had nothing to do with pressure from the United States or the EU; nonetheless, where possible, GVN leadership attempts to take into account the concerns of the international community and respond to those as much as possible. The "as much as possible" construction means that we will not be able to satisfy each other all the time, Ba

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Hung added. "Our security concerns on the one hand and your laws on the other will create a conflict," he said.

¶ 7. (SBU) Vietnam has shown its cooperation with the United States on this issue in various ways, Ba Hung continued, including visits and dialogues and even facilitating meetings with "so-called dissidents" that the GVN would really rather not see happen. The result of this, Vietnam hopes, will be a USG determination to remove Vietnam from the list of Countries of Particular Concern for religious freedom.

¶ 8. (SBU) Grove noted that true security comes from the rule of law, and said that, in the eyes of the State/Foreign Operations Subcommittee, Vietnam's way of thinking on this subject is coming closer to the United States' way of thinking. Threats, where they exist, are often transnational, such as drugs, HIV/AIDS and avian influenza (AI). This is why the United States assists Vietnam, particularly in HIV and AI prevention. Ba Hung responded that Vietnam greatly appreciates U.S. assistance in these areas and is aware that it has to work very hard to ensure that the assistance is used properly. U.S. AI and HIV/AIDS assistance represents one of the largest projects the GVN has with any country, so the Ministry of Health (MOH) is under significant pressure to do a good job. The GVN is aware that President Bush will want to see how these funds are being spent, and so MOH needs to strengthen its efforts.

¶ 9. (SBU) AI and HIV/AIDS are threats to Vietnam's socioeconomic and national security, Grove continued. Vietnam faces other real challenges as well that come from its neighbors' actions, such as drugs and trafficking in persons (TIP), that cross borders. Ba Hung agreed, noting that the long, difficult-to-police border with Cambodia is the site of significant trafficking in women in children as well as drugs. Vietnam has made a strong effort to control

TIP, but it still exists and is still a major problem. Grove said that the USG knows that Vietnam understands the dangers of drugs, HIV/AIDS, AI, TIP and other transnational threats, but the challenge is how to make less responsible regional states such as Cambodia and Burma understand the dangers as well. Burma is a major source point for these transnational threats, he observed. How can Vietnam engage with Burma to address them?

¶10. (SBU) Ba Hung said that Vietnam addressed these issues with Cambodia in the context of annual interagency discussions held during leadership visits. Lately, the focus has been on TIP, drugs and the rising problem of gasoline and oil smuggling. Another problem is the issue of ethnic minority migrants from the Central Highlands illegally crossing the border into Cambodia. Vietnam has been unable to stop this. Burma is a different story. Vietnam has "good, not great" relations with Burma and has posted some successes in working with Rangoon on fighting drugs. It remains a challenge, though, with some denial of real political problems by the Burmese government.

¶11. (SBU) Grove said he hopes our areas of bilateral cooperation can be increased and expanded. He added that he hopes that Vietnam will be able to play an active and constructive role in the region, and encourage positive developments within ASEAN and other regional organizations. Vietnam should be outward-looking and more involved with its neighbors, and that means more than simple cooperation; pressure and influence are crucial. Drug trafficking in Cambodia, for example, is treated as a trivial criminal offense, with traffickers receiving little more than a slap on the wrist. Ba Hung said that Vietnam's leaders try to persuade Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen to be more effective in the fight against transnational threats. Vietnam enforces drug laws vigorously, and executes "many" drug dealers each year. In Cambodia, it is easy for them to escape prosecution. Vietnam's enforcement is much better, but it is difficult to persuade Hun Sen to follow the same path. Alluding to China, Ba Hung said "it is difficult to get Cambodia to cooperate with us because they listen to someone else." The Cambodians are interested in give-and-take, and suggestions accompanied by either the offer of assistance or the threat to cut off assistance are more effective than discussions based solely on goodwill and friendship. Hun Sen does not listen to Vietnam, Ba Hung said, because Vietnam has no leverage. China, however, has leverage - and thus Hun Sen's ear. Regardless, Vietnam will continue to press Cambodia to act responsibly.

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MFA SOUTHEAST ASIA DEPARTMENT

¶12. (SBU) Later the same day, Grove met with MFA Director General and Assistant Minister for Southeast Asia Do Ngoc Son. Grove said he is interested in Vietnam's regional role and concerned about Vietnam's vulnerability to transnational threats originating in other, less responsible, Southeast Asian countries. DG Son said that dealing with Southeast Asia is a high priority in Vietnamese foreign policy, and noted that no country can address transnational threats alone. Vietnam greatly appreciates U.S. assistance on HIV/AIDS and AI, because it provides Vietnam a "strong hand" to combat these threats. Drugs are another major concern, and a strong reason why Vietnam is working so closely with other countries in the region through the ASEAN drug committee and the six-party MOU on drug control. Vietnam has a long border that is difficult to patrol, and so is very vulnerable to drug trafficking, DG Son said. The GVN appreciates U.S. anti-drug assistance and funding and would like more.

¶13. (SBU) Grove said that money is not the only issue; political will needs to be present for there to be a

reasonable return on investment for assistance. Vietnam is clearly serious about finding solutions to the problems of HIV/AIDS and AI, but the same cannot be said of Cambodia and Burma. How can the region convince these governments to do better on the issues that affect all the states in Southeast Asia, Grove asked. Their negligence affects everyone. DG Son responded that he questioned whether the infrastructures in both countries are sufficient to cope with the challenges, and noted that they are very poor countries with significant needs for technical, material and human resources. Vietnam is trying to build up its relations with Cambodia by increasing the frequency of bilateral meetings at the leadership level and at the local and provincial levels. The success of this effort is clear already. The recently concluded border agreement and an arrangement to allow Cambodian citizens to use Vietnamese education and health infrastructure in border areas are examples, he said.

¶14. (SBU) Grove noted the problem with corruption in Cambodia, which exists throughout the public and private sectors. The level of corruption has reached such proportions that it is impacting international aid, which is an essential part of Cambodia's operating budget. The only country that is increasing assistance to Cambodia in the face of this corruption is China, which increases China's influence in Cambodia. DG Son agreed that, in Cambodia, aid is not respected in some sectors, and therefore assistance is not well implemented. The United States should keep in mind that Cambodia's leaders are interested in the development of the country for the benefit of the Cambodian people, and to that end they are developing relations with whatever countries can help them, which means China. China's emergence means that it has increased influence and presence in Southeast Asia. Vietnam cannot, and does not want to, stop this. The challenge is how to respond to it. In Cambodia, China is in the position to increase its diplomatic efforts, increase its assistance, increase its tempo of official visits, and thus increase its influence there. Meanwhile, Vietnam is just trying to be a good neighbor and not interfere.

¶15. (SBU) Grove suggested that Hun Sen's gravitation towards the Chinese is calculated; DG Son agreed that it is, and that it is designed to generate more foreign aid for Cambodia. He cautioned that, if the United States continues to harp on human rights, HIV/AIDS and corruption in Cambodia, it will be forced to withdraw from Cambodia the way it has with Burma, thus abdicating all influence to China. Grove acknowledged that Hun Sen is a complex and complicated leader, and that the United States cannot walk away from Cambodia without allowing China to fill the vacuum.

¶16. (SBU) Grove said that Burma represents an even more difficult problem for Vietnam and the ASEAN region because of the "storm cloud" of drugs that gathers over Burma and then spreads to other countries. The United States hopes Vietnam will help find a solution to the political situation in Burma that allows these transnational problems to fester. Grove said that the United States understands that Vietnam regards the situation in Burma as an internal affair, but noted that the problems that Burma exports harm Vietnamese citizens and Vietnamese children.

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¶17. (SBU) DG Son said that ASEAN is in the process of gathering information on Burma, while respecting the principle of non-interference in internal affairs of member states. ASEAN acknowledges the negative effects on member states of the situation in Burma. The long embargo and strong sanctions of the international community and the United States have driven Burma into the arms of the Chinese. When Khin Nyunt was in the government, more was possible, but now that Than Shwe has taken total control, things are more uncertain. It is possible that the United

States and the EU are demanding too much from Burma and asking the government to change too fast. The leadership is military, trying to protect itself and survive. ASEAN's strategy is to engage them, which is why Burma was admitted to ASEAN, and as a result they agreed to the road map. Engagement at such a high level may be too radical for the United States DG Son said, but it is the right direction: give them time, encourage them and engage them. Pressure and isolation will not change the regime in Burma, it will simply deprive the USG of the opportunity to discover what and how they are thinking. The USG is blocking them from speaking, and simultaneously building a wall between itself and the people and leaders of Burma. That means that, instead of a dialogue, the USG is talking to a wall. And for the Burmese generals, DG Son concluded, the only way around that wall is north.

¶18. (SBU) Grove said the SPDC is its own worst enemy and is unwilling to talk. Grove had wanted to visit Burma on this trip, but was not allowed to go. DG Son suggested that this is probably the result of strong USG measures against Burma. The United States should reduce and soften its actions against Burma and see what the reaction is to that. For Asians, "a soft voice is easier to listen to than shouting." The United States has an important role to play in the region and can help a lot. The more the United States assists and takes part in the economic development of poor states in the region, the better. In particular, DG Son said, Laos and Cambodia need assistance. "Don't talk about human rights with them," he counseled. "A country that needs health, food, humanitarian and development assistance is concerned with its stomach, not its human rights." DG Son suggested a "2 + 1" formulation for the delivery of foreign assistance to the region, which could entail the United States and Vietnam partnering to provide aid to a third country. Like Vietnam's relationship with the United States, as economic development occurs with other states in Southeast Asia, engagement on more issues of importance to the United States will be possible.

¶19. (U) Mr. Grove has cleared this message.

MARINE